

*Suave! et Vale!*

# RESPONSE

BY

JOS. B. CUMMING

TO THE TOAST:

"New Ideas, New Departures, New South"

AT THE 74th ANNUAL DINNER

OF THE

New England Society of Charleston, S. C.,

DECEMBER 22D, 1893.



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My hearers will, I trust, indulge me in a few remarks at the outset of at least questionable taste, for they are more about myself than my theme. They are, however, not so far removed from the sentiment, which I am asked to respond to, but that that sentiment has itself suggested them. I am asked to speak of new things—"New Ideas, New Departures, a New South." Unfortunately my temperament is such that I am ever less interested in the new than in the old. I have ever been more disposed to look back with tenderness than forward with interest. My guest even of happy hours has been Hope less often than Memory. I have ever found more to charm in the softened recollections of the past than in high expectations of the future. Were I a worshipper of the Sun, my sacrifices would be made to the setting rather than the rising orb. Had my lot been other than that of a commonplace worker in the world's affairs, had my life been one not of action but of contemplation, I would have been a fond dreamer over things departed, and not the clear visioned prophet of things to come. My spirit turns unbidden, not to our bustling, stirring West, but where, "West of our West, sleeps the ancient East."

But after all, the theme, to which you invite me, is not alien to this temperament. It calls for retrospection as well as insight into the present and foresight of the future. For can I speak of the new without first describing what is old? By such a commonplace argument I strive to find a reason why, though commissioned apparently to speak only of new things, I turn my face fondly to that Old South, of which I shall have so much to say.

The theme is a very comprehensive one. Surely those who proposed it intended to put some limitation on its treatment. I have found the true limitation, I believe, by construing, as it were, the several phrases of the sentiment, as lawyers say, *in pari materia*. So construing them, I conceive that the keynote

to the whole is the word "ideas." It is to the field of ideas that consideration is to be confined. The new "departures" are the new views of things, social and political, whose fountain is the changed ideas of the day. The phrase "New South" is not meant to invite me to a review of the progress made by these Southern States in material pursuits. But, rather, as I conceive it, the "New South" of the theme has nothing to do with any purely geographical division as such, but with the people who inhabit this Southland under conditions radically changed from those which their fathers knew, and the discussion is as to how this people is changed in its ideas, its views, its manners, its sentiments. It is a supposed new social and political and sentimental South that the theme makes mention of. It is to be a study in sociology rather than in statistics.

And here let me pause to define—as is always best to do—one of the principal terms, as I understand it, to be used in this discussion—"The South." Of course, the term is not meant to be expressive of any geographical relations. "The South," of this toast, it is conceivable, might have had its situs in some far northern region, or have rested east or west. The word is used here to express a civilization, maintained by the people dwelling south of the Mason and Dixon line. No relation to the Pole or to the Equator is intended to be indicated by the word "South," used in this connection, but conditions, ideas, manners, sentiments.

In this comparative treatment—the only form of treatment I can conceive of—in which we measure the new by considering the old, unquestionably, looming up as by far the most conspicuous feature in the landscape, is slavery. Unquestionably that institution was the most potent formative factor of the Old South. In a half flippant way, we speak of it as "the peculiar institution." But how few of those who use this phrase really consider how unspeakably peculiar it was! In thus characterizing it, I do not refer so much to its intrinsic features as to its place in time and as to the people who maintained it. What a stupendous anachronism it was! Surviving far into the Nine-

teenth Century—an age strongly, aye fiercely, anti-privilege, a leveling age—an age wherein the theory of the equality of man is entertained all through Christendom, at least, and the practice of it is at least widespread, there was maintained with all the force of law and public opinion of the South complete and perfect slavery of millions of human beings. In an age when all privileged classes were generally considered indefensible anomalies, the white men of the South were absolute lords and masters of millions of men. Most peculiar and wonderful, then, was this institution in its relation to time.

But far more wonderful was it viewed in relation to the people who maintained it. Where would the thinker of abstract thoughts look for a slavery with as few limitations as that of the South? Would he expect to find it among a humane, a refined, a gentle and a generally pious people? And yet conspicuously such were the people of the Old South. Not only, therefore, was slavery a peculiar institution in relation to the epoch in which it flourished, but also in reference to the people who cherished it. Its supporters would be looked for by the abstract thinker among a rude, a harsh, a pitiless people. But in the Old South there existed the most thoroughly organized system of servitude that perhaps the world has ever known, upheld by law, approved by religious teachers, and sustained and defended to the last extremity by a noble, a humane and a gentle race of men.

It could not be otherwise than that this strange condition was a powerful factor in forming the character and in moulding the traits of the people of the South. It could not be otherwise than that a people, living under different conditions from all other people, should show the effect of their unique environment and be different from other people. And so they were. I cannot hope to unfold before you the differences from other people which marked the South, but that there was a difference, whatever may have caused it, was felt by friend and foe alike. The term "South" meant a people apart.

This tremendous force, slavery, was all the more effec-

tive, too, by reason of the isolation it produced. For truly the South was isolated—isolated in the matter of things material, and isolated in its habits of thought. The stupendous anachronism of slavery, like a rock bound coast, beat back the tide of immigration. On the side of intellectual development, the necessity we were under—a necessity which grew apace as time rolled on—to defend our peculiar institution against the opinion, the sentiment and the conscience of Christendom, cut us off from the great world of thought and forced us into a little Republic of letters of our own—a Republic full of fight, aggressive, even fierce, and in its way strong.

In this great, aye, and solemn isolation, there was a wonderful meeting of extremes, such as the world had not known and could not know before. In it there existed a slavery which, so far as legal sanction was concerned, was as absolute as any far younger time and any far different land had ever known. But it was shone upon by the light of this as yet latest century of time. Here was a dominant race absolute masters of another race. But on this dominant race were the influences of the most enlightened of the ages. Thus the extremes had met and one of the results was that slavery—that is to say, the possession of unrestrained power over one's fellow-man, which among barbarous people tends to brutality, there in the Old South, shone on by the spirit of the age, furnished the rare garden in which grew self-control, generosity, genuine kindness for the weak, mercy, and many other ennobling traits. And so, too, under this remarkable juxtaposition of the ancient estate of slavery and the softening influences of the latest of the centuries, there lived a ruling people whose characteristics were all its own; and on this Old South there were lights and shadows which rested on no other land under the vault of heaven.

If I had the ability and the equipment—as I have not—for the historical, sociological and philosophical study of the other forces, political, social, religious, racial, educational, climatic, which made the representative people of the South what they were, this would not be an occasion for the undertaking.



Let us only consider—and that necessarily only very partially—what they were, what characteristics they presented, which seemed to segregate them from other peoples, even those of their own land. As in considering the forces which formed them into what they were, I have dealt only on the greatest, slavery, so necessarily only a few can I mention of their traits.

Perhaps the one word which has been oftenest used to indicate that there was something in the representative Southerner—in his sentiments, his bearing, his conduct—characteristic of him, is chivalry. It was in use by friend and foe alike. In the mouth of some, it might be a boast; on the lips of many, it was apt to be a sneer. An impartial critic ought to find in it its true significance. Doubtless there passed under this name whereof to boast and also under the same name whereat to sneer. There was the false and there was the true. There was a “chivalry” which manifested itself in bravado and turbulence. A “chivalry” which combined the absurd and the tragic, grotesque punctilio with the shedding of blood. Anything stamped with the name of “chivalry” would receive the sneers of some, but here was a brand of chivalry worthy the execrations of all. But by the side of this noxious weed grew a noble plant, a true flower of chivalry. If one cannot exactly describe it, one can tell what it was not. It was not sordid. It was not mean. It was not low. It was not commercial. If one cannot present a well-defined, clean-cut image of it, one can at least name some of its qualities and its ways. It was high-minded. It was generous. It scorned unfairness. Like King Arthur and his greatest knight, it “forebore its own advantage.” To it there was “no heaven so high as faith.” It lived in an atmosphere other than that of the mart. It esteemed many things better than wealth. To it stainless honor was a priceless jewel. True deference to woman was its sacred duty and its graceful ornament. Such as it was, it was not a mere profession, but it was a genuine sentiment, a rule of conduct and a living force. Let those of us who cherish the memory of the South not permit ourselves to be laughed out of the use of this goodly word, when we wish to

speak tenderly but truthfully of the vanished past, for it expressed a living reality, belated perhaps in a prosaic age, but worthy of all honor.

Another feature in this mental and moral landscape we look back upon was something, which on another occasion I have spoken of as "that spirit, that morality, that habit of thought and of feeling, whatever it may be called, which will not make merchandise of principles; which will not worship success for its own sake; which raises love, friendship, honor, faith to the realm of sacred things—in a word, which finds its Rome, its city of the soul, in the world of sentiment rather than in the world of materialism."

I cannot undertake to dwell on other features of this landscape resting in the shadow. I can only touch lightly here and there. I can speak only a passing word as to how the rural life of its representative people fostered reflection, contemplation, revery. How it was the land of independent thinkers and romantic dreamers—thinkers and dreamers alike without ambition, and clothing their reflections and their dreams in no literature. How the voice of nature was stronger and the rule of conventionalities weaker than with us. How fashion was neither enshrined nor enthroned. How within the limits of essential principles there was variety of conduct. How the world was not in a whirl. How there was not the rush and feverishness of competition in all things. How it was the home of peace and repose, and romance's own native land.

Alas! alas! vain is my effort to unroll before you a chart of that perished time, of that vanished realm. My effort is to point out the differences between the South and other people. I feel them, I know them, I confidently proclaim their reality. But how difficult they are to seize; how ghostlike they elude our grasp and glide into the shadow! They live not so much in substance as in spirit. They are not so much revealed to the senses and capable of description in language as they are discerned by the spirit.

I imagine to myself some visible spirit of the air commis-

sioned by the Great Ruler to direct his flight over all lands and inspect them from his aerial path, as he wings his way over that Old South. His master has not sent forth this minister unfitted for his great and solemn mission. Wherefore this trusted servant of his experiences not the limitations, which time and distance impose on our clogged human senses; and so the little cities, scattered here and there, lie before him, and sequestered homes all over the land emerge into his view. Sound, too, comes to him, unimpaired by space or obstacle. It brings to his perceptions no hum of the market place, no noise of fierce competitions, no clatter of the mad race after riches. This minister, too, to do his heaven-appointed task, is endowed with such susceptibility and receptivity, that he not only embraces all subjects of sight and hearing, but the thoughts and feelings, the sentiments and aspirations—the soul and spirit life of peoples—qualify for him the air which uplifts his mighty pinions and affect his spirit nature, as the mingled fragrance of many flowers floats on the breath of the summer night to our own delighted senses. And so the strong wings seem to become more buoyant in his flight over this Old South, into whose atmosphere have floated the emanations of soul and spirit of a goodly people. I seem to see this wonderful inspector of realms at the moment he enters the air piled above that old land, and to note his manifestations of solemn surprise. I seem to hear him say: This land that lies down there is not like any other beheld in all my course. When I return to those high courts that sent me forth, I must report that a strange shadow overspreads it; that a wondrous light mingles with the shadow. The shadow itself seems very dark, but there is some marvelous quality in the light, so that the mingling is unlike anything else beheld in all my flight over land and sea. It is not blackness, neither is it the light of perfect day. It is not gloom, neither is it the brightness of joy. A sort of twilight rests upon the land. The overhanging air, too, has qualities all its own—and the boundaries of this land stand out bold and stern, marking it off from all else of earth. And this my report will be the latest

on this sequestered land; for my successor in this high office at his coming, though it be delayed but a little while, will find this land not here—but vanished.

Thus in many ways, even to the calling to my assistance the spirits of the air, I try to body forth some image of the Old South. I fear I have succeeded in nothing except in showing that I cherish its memory blindly as well as fondly. But I am not blind. I have spoken of it as a land under a great shadow. I know it held its sordid, its vicious, its ignorant, its brutal. I know that to the vicious and the brutal slavery gave opportunities for hideous deeds, which elsewhere could not have happened. And yet I have treated this Old South only in reference to such noble characteristics as true honor, true chivalry, and elevated traits of character. And so I think it ought to be regarded in any general treatment of the subject. To treat the Old South in detail is out of the question on an occasion like this; and to treat of any subject in a general way, one must present its most salient characteristics. I believe I have presented the Old South, so far as I have presented it at all, as it stands in the memory of its living assessors, and as it should live in song and story.

But it is gone! The Island of Atlantis has not more effectually disappeared beneath the billows of the Atlantic. The physical forces which held that mythical island above the waves were withdrawn and it sank. The political and social forces, which created the Old South, are spent, and it has disappeared. The whole landscape has changed. The forces and the resultants are gone forever.

But why, it may well be asked, do I linger so long speaking of old ideas and the Old South, when my theme is the New? I can fancy the dismay of my hearers at the apprehension that these remarks may run on indefinitely, if all this talk about the Old is only introductory of my real theme, the New. I hasten to allay all anxiety on this point. The subject assigned me is in effect, the "New South." I can only treat that subject as it presents itself to my mind. I could not deal with the subject by telling you what the New South is; for to my vision no New South is revealed.

The toast must needs address itself to my mind as if this hospitable society had said to me: Tell us whether you think there is a New South, and if there is, give us your views about it. To this my thought and my convictions answer: There is no New South. But I could not content myself or maintain an attitude of deference to you by a mere curt and bald statement to that effect. I must justify it, if I can, by some reason. I have tried to do so by showing what the "Old South" was. If I have half succeeded in this, I have, in the doing it, demonstrated that there is not, and there cannot be, a "New South." For "South" in this connection indicated a peculiar civilization, a condition. In that sense, there could not be any South but that Old South. It was the resultant of certain forces. It could not exist after those forces ceased any more than the bark will sail on when the wind subsides. The firmly rooted land, it is true, bears the same relation as of yore to the points of the compass, but it is no longer the "South." There are "new ideas" in this land thus situated, but they are not ideas of a "South;" they are simply the ideas of a universal and uniform civilization. There are "new departures," but they indicate nothing except that we have taken our place in the uniformed ranks of the world generally.

As expressive of anything existing today the word "South" is meaningless, except in its primary signification of certain relations to the pole and the equator. Our "new ideas" are the assimilation of our ideas to those of the civilized world generally. Our "new departures" consist only in our doing like the rest of the world. It all means no more than this: We have "joined the procession." As it marches by there is nothing to distinguish us from the ranks generally. We are no more "South" in the sense of that word, used to describe a civilization, than we are North. We are following the fashion as far as we can, whatever it may be. We are striving to be as much like other people as we possibly can, and the farther we fall short in that endeavor the more awkward we feel. We have lost all thought of being different from other peoples.

Our newness of ideas and of departures consists wholly in conforming to the ideas of the rest of the world and doing just as they do, and to speak of our new ideas and new departures would be to take this uniform world as a theme. And so, from my standpoint, unless one is going to enter upon the discussion of the world's progress generally in ideas and achievements, he can say nothing on the toast, "New Ideas" and "New Departures" in the South, except that we are like the rest of the world. The "South" has not wholly ceased to exist. There are some fragments of it yet. But when you find them they are old—the Old South. Whatever there is of new is not the "South," but the world. What there is of "South" is fast disappearing as time rolls on, just as the geographical South is left behind one who turns his back upon the North Pole and marches steadily to the equator.

There may seem to be a tone of regret running through what I say. If there is, it is the regret that one feels when the idle flow of the river is set to work to turn the wheels of a factory, or when the stately monarchs of the forest must be laid low that some railway may have its right-of-way.

So, all hail the New! It is colorless, but strong. It is uniform, but it is not out of place in the ages. It is hard, but it is practical. Whatever it is, of good or of evil, it is not "South."

And farewell the Old! the land where the ancient shadow and the new light commingled, making a twilight land; the land with an atmosphere all its own; the land with the rock-bound coast; the land of impassable frontiers—the isolated, the lonely and the friendless!

All hail! thou new! We receive thee as our fate and fortune.

Farewell thou old! Thee, thee we cherish in pathetic memory.

Hail and farewell. *Salve et vale!*





